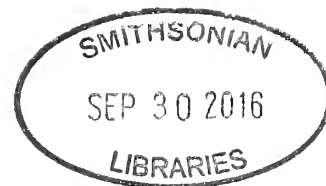


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the PHOENIX

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A New Species of Owl from Oman

In the 1930s the Arabian Woodpecker *Dendrocopos doriae*, was collected in the Hedjaz by H. St. J. B. Philby. It was described for science 78 years ago and was the last new species described from Arabia. Well now Arabia has another new species and in all likelihood a new endemic. The Oman Owl *Strix omanensis* was found in the Gubbrah bowl (XB23) on the northern edge of the Jebal al Akhdar in northern Oman during spring 2013. It has been described in detail from numerous good photographs and sound recordings taken in the wild and published as a new species to science by its discoverers the Sound Approach Team (Robb, M.S., A van den Berg & M. Constantine. 2013. A new species of *Strix* owl from Oman. *Dutch Birding* 35(5): 275-310).

It is unusual, but not unprecedented, that a species is described for science from photos and sound recordings, without even a feather as concrete evidence. However it seems likely that such physical evidence will come along in the not too distant future as everyone will be wanting to see it, and then hopefully the DNA will tell a better story of relationships to other *Strix* owls. On first sight the photos of the new owl suggest a rather dark-faced, dark-backed Hume's Owl *Strix butleri*, a species which has never been recorded in the highlands that stretch across northern Oman and northern UAE.

Response to this exciting news has so far been rather muted, perhaps everyone is waiting for DNA analysis of that feather before venturing an opinion? The comments I have heard have been along the lines of 'why isn't it a Hume's Owl? Indeed looking at the photos you could easily convince yourself that it is a Hume's but when you hear the recordings you are left in no doubt that it is a different species. I have probably heard as many Hume's Owls as anyone, all over its range in Arabia, but I have never heard a owl like the recordings from Gubbrah bowl. There are several recordings of the various calls of the new owl and lots of details of its discovery on the Sound Approach website at <http://soundapproach.co.uk/omani-owl-diary-of-discovery>. The dove-like call of Hume's, which is generally consistent throughout its Middle East range, is usually rendered as a hoot followed by



The new Arabian owl species discovered in the Jebal al Akhdar foothills (XB23) during 2013. The Oman Owl *Strix omanensis* is very similar in size and shape to Hume's Owl *S. butleri*, which also has orange irises. It differs from that species by being generally darker above and on the underside has vertical dark lines, unlike Hume's which has rather faint dark horizontal bars. The facial disc is noticeably grey, darker above the eyes, compared to the more even and buffish grey of the Hume's. (Photos: Arnoud van den Berg)



ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF THE MIDDLE EAST
THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

A generous grant was received from OSME (www.osme.org) towards the cost of printing and distributing *Phoenix* 30.

two short double notes, i.e. 'hooo hu-hu hu-hu'. The Oman Owl is lower pitched and is more drawn out and consists typically of a single hoot followed by another single hoot and then two short notes, I would render this as 'hooo hooo hu hu'. This is not quite how the authors describe it but they do liken the call to a slow version of the opening notes of the wedding tune, 'Here comes the bride', which is a very helpful way to remember the call. As mentioned the new owl's call is slower than Hume's but, with some imagination, one can kind of hear a gruff, tired, Hume's Owl trying to get out in the Oman Owl's call. Perhaps another indication of a close relationship. With night birds, which need to communicate and locate each other in the dark, I believe that the call has to be a crucial part of a species identity, similar looking birds sounding different are different species. The new owl must be a close relative to Hume's and when we get the DNA we can see just how close it is. I would guess that they have a common ancestry, rather than one is an offshoot of the other, with the Oman Owl isolated in northern Oman by desert to the south and west and sea to the north and west for long enough to enable the two to speciate.

Its wider habitat is not identified yet, it was recorded in a lowland area (500 m) of cliffs and canyons with scattered acacia scrub, it never ventured away from cliffs. This habitat is typical of regions where the northern Oman/UAE highlands meet the Batinah coastal plain and also of the southern (interior) flank of the range. Up to seven individuals in four territories were recorded within about a 5 km linear distance in the Gubbrah area, which is actually quite a high density for arid country owls. Two other reports of *Strix* owl calls in this region¹ have been in similar habitats and altitude range. If it is restricted to lower altitude rocky habitats it would be a little surprising because Hume's has a wide altitude range from sea level to at least 2800 m. Hume's also has a wide habitat tolerance from arid rocky escarpments such as near Riyadh and north eastern Saudi Arabia to the tihama and temperate highlands of south west Saudi Arabia, Yemen and southern Oman. Its wider range includes north east Egypt, possibly Socotra (where *Strix* owls have been heard) and probably south west Iran and coastal Pakistan. The type locality of *Strix butleri* is the Mekran coast of Iran/Pakistan, which has never been precisely identified and it has not been recorded again there since its discovery in the 19th Century. Lack of a suitable habitat bridge is probably the main reason that the sedentary Hume's Owl has not been recorded in northern Oman.

The lower pitch call of the new owl makes it much harder to hear than Hume's but this new bird will probably be on the itinerary of every birder to the area in the future. Let's hope visitors to the region in the coming months and years can gather and publish more information and localities for a bird that has eluded so many until now. There might even be some breeding evidence forthcoming.

Mike Jennings

¹ One of these calls, also from the Jebal al Akhdar, has been identified as *Strix omanensis* and I understand is to be published shortly in *Dutch Birding*, the other in April 2006 from Wadi Wurrayah (WA27), UAE is being investigated.

The Last Phoenix

After a run of 30 years I have decided that *Phoenix*, as we know it, will stop with this issue. Despite great generosity by the Ornithological Society of the Middle East in supporting the present and the previous issue, I have not been able to prepare or distribute the newsletter as widely as I would have liked since the end of sponsorship from the Saudi Wildlife Authority with No 27. It also occurred to me that after 30 years maybe it is time for a change, it will certainly free up lots of time for me during a busy time of year. I shall be writing to subscribers separately.

No 30 it a terrific issue to go out with, this issue contains details of an entirely new to science bird species from Arabia, Oman Owl *Strix omanensis* - see page 1, a fantastic new breeding species for Arabia - the Greater Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* in Saudi Arabia (page 23) and a new endemic brought to us by a taxonomic split, Arabian Scops Owl *Otus pamelae* (page 7). There is even a new Atlas square to announce, UB27 appeared out of the sea just off Dubai! (Page 6)

With the demise of *Phoenix* I should point out that the ABBA project and database will continue to gather and share information but results will be published through other outlets. I personally managed three visits to Arabia during 2013, to the UAE, Oman and Yemen (Socotra), ABBA Surveys 46-48 respectively, there is a note on Socotra in August at page 19. and I am planning other trips in 2014.

By the way I do still have a few copies of the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* (Vol 25 of Fauna of Arabia, 2010) available for sale. The price is approximately half what you would pay from retailers. Send an email for details to Arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com.

I would like to place on record my appreciation of the great deal of help I have received from very many people in the production of *Phoenix*, and the ABBA project generally, over the years. I have been very lucky to have had contributions from so many authors over the years who have published their results and observations in *Phoenix*. I have been a terrible nag to them occasionally but have always managed to fill each issue because of their help. I have also had much financial support from individual well wishers over the years and organisations like OSME have provided help right from the start. Of course the major sponsorship over the years from 1987 to 2011 came from the NCWCD in Riyadh, and then the SWA in the last few years. I would like to single out my special thanks to Professor Abdulaziz Abuzinada, Secretary General of the NCWCD during the period 1987 to 2009 for the special kindnesses, hospitality, friendship but especially patience, he extended towards me whilst completing fieldwork in Arabia and compiling the Atlas for publication.

Michael Jennings



Clockwise from top left:

Three wild caught Asian Houbara Bustards *Chlamydotis macqueenii* were released as part of a Saudi Wildlife Authority research project in northern Saudi Arabia (HA39) in April 2011. Until Autumn 2013 their three northwards migrations to breeding grounds and their return each year to winter in northern Arabia, followed a remarkably similar pattern from year to year. See page 4.

Juvenile Black-headed Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg*. The species bred for the first time in Oman during 2013 at the Sohar Sun farms (WB25). See page 4. (Photo: John Atkins). There is more news of the Sohar Sun Farms at page 6.



Crah Plovers *Dromas ardeola* are a specialist feeder, their diet is almost exclusively crabs. Ahmed al Ali was photographing in the early morning on the shore at Al Rifaa (VB28) north of Umm al Qiwayn, UAE, on 5 February 2011, when his hide was approached by Crab Plovers. He then got an excellent sequence of photos as one killed and ate a large crab. It first hit the crab in the middle of its carapace with its bill making a large hole, this probably killed the crab but to make sure the crab could do no injury to the bird it then removed the claws. Afterwards it opened up the carapace and ate the internal organs, later it returned to the claws and swallowed at least one whole. Kleptoparasitism is also practised by the species and photos were also obtained of a second Crab Plover trying to snatch the crab, but it was driven off by the first.

A Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* chick runs by a pool near Sitra (QB29), Bahrain in May 2012, the first breeding record for Bahrain. See page 4. (Photo: Brendan Kavanagh).

First Breeding Record of Little Ringed Plover in Bahrain

The Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* breeds from western Europe and Scandinavia through central and eastern Asia as far east as Korea, China and Japan, in the southwest to northern Africa and the Canary islands through the Middle East to north of the Himalayas (del Hoyo et al, 1996). Three subspecies are currently recognised, the one breeding in the Middle East having been identified as *C. d. cronicus*, which is migratory over most of its range spending the winter south of its breeding range (Jennings, 2010).

Within the Arabian Gulf Little Ringed Plovers have been recorded breeding in small numbers in Oman (first breeding in 1960s), Saudi Arabia (breeding since 1970s), in Qatar, the UAE and most recently in Kuwait (first chick recorded in 2008). While it is difficult to get an accurate population estimate of an opportunistic nesting species such as the Little Ringed Plover, best estimates put the total breeding population in the Gulf countries at approximately 500 pairs (Jennings, 2010).

Little Ringed Plovers prefer fresh or brackish water and are more likely to be seen usually in small numbers at inland sites than on the coast. They avoid dense vegetation and are attracted to bare or sparsely vegetated areas of sand, shingle or silt next to water. This type of terrain has increased in the Gulf region in recent decades due to increased human activity including crop irrigation and waste water and treated effluent discharge providing surface water.

On 19 May 2012, while bird-watching at a disused stone quarry west of the Bahrain Oil Refinery (QB29), I noticed a pair of Little Ringed Plovers behaving in a manner which suggested they might be breeding. As they were approached the birds performed a typical 'broken wing' distraction behaviour used by several other plover species in defence of their nest or young. I withdrew immediately to approximately 50 metres distance and after a few minutes the birds returned to normal feeding behaviour. Subsequently two chicks appeared from the vicinity of a small pond and proceeded to join their parents in feeding (photo page 3). I approached the family party again and this time the parents flew up making alarm calls which resulted in the chicks freezing on the spot. The two chicks were ringed with British Trust for Ornithology rings. The site was visited several more times over the next ten days and the pair was deemed to have successfully reared both chicks to fledging. During the rearing period no Kentish Plover *C. alexandrinus* were recorded using the pond, though they were present both before the Little Ringed Plover chicks were recorded and subsequent to the successful fledging of the brood. A single pair of Kentish Plovers reared three chicks of their own in a neighbouring pond within the same quarry that year.

This observation is confirmation of the first breeding of this opportunistic nester in Bahrain and brings the number of breeding plover species in the kingdom to two.

References: ● del Hoyo, J., A. Elliott & J. Sargatal (eds).

1996. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, Vol 3, Hoatzin to Auks. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona. ●Jennings, MC. 2010. Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25: 314 - 316.

Brendan Kavanagh, 123 St Stephens Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (bkavanagh@rcsi.ie).

First breeding for Oman of Black-headed Yellow Wagtail at Sohar

On the afternoon of 31 May 2013, we were checking the ponds at Sun Farm, Sohar (WB25), on the Batinah coast of northern Oman, when we found a female Black-headed Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava feldegg* on a clump of dead grass, with a very odd looking, mottled bird nearby, which we did not immediately recognize (page 3). Soon the female approached it, at which point it began frantically food-begging, and we realized that it was a recently fledged Black-headed Yellow Wagtail. Shortly afterwards a male joined the female and the fledged young and for a while the three birds were in close proximity. We watched as the female fed the fledged young several times in the next 10-15 minutes. Later that afternoon we found a female and an identically plumaged young, presumably the same birds, on one of the pivot fields. The fledged young was still food-begging and being fed. On 1 June we re-located the female with the fledged young on the same pivot field. We also observed a male displaying to and being chased off by another female. The fledged young was present for a further week, during which time it grew and changed considerably in appearance. This is the first confirmed breeding record of Black-headed Yellow Wagtail for Oman, though breeding or attempted breeding was suspected at Sun Farm in June 2012.

John Atkins and Alma Garrido. Flat 7 Wickford House, 43 Sopers Lane, Christchurch, Dorset, BH23 1JF, UK (johnatko@omantel.net.omemail)

Houbara Bustard movement between Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan

By M. Zafar-ul Islam, Ahmed Boug, Sulaiman Alshariri & Hajid Alsubai

Three sub-adult (1♂, 2♀) Asian Houbara Bustards *Chlamydotis macqueenii* were caught on their wintering grounds in the north east of Al Jauf (FB36) by Sulaiman Alshariri, a conservation conscious falconer. He donated them to the Saudi Wildlife Authority which is studying the migration patterns of the species. They were fitted with satellite transmitters on 2 April 2011 by SWA and released near the Saudi-Iraq border, at the place called Al Judaidah (HA39), about 65km north east of Ar'ar' city. The SWA research studies are in collaboration with National Avian Research Center and the Houbara Fund in Abu Dhabi, under the umbrella of GCC collaboration in wildlife research. These birds have now been successfully followed for two and a half years on their journeys between Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan.

This is the first instance of a multiple release of satellite tagged

Houbara in Arabia in which birds have been monitored returning to their breeding ground in central Asia and on subsequent migrations. After release the birds immediately went over the border to Iraq and explored the local area for a few weeks. Two of them started moving north east in May 2011 towards the Iraq/Iran border and stayed in western Iraq for most of 2011. The third bird remained near the release site in Iraq with only local movement. On 2 April 2012, a year after release, all three started flying towards north-central Iran and within two weeks, all three reached western Kazakhstan via Tajikistan. They spent the summer in western Kazakhstan and came back to the same wintering localities, using the same migratory route in October 2012. During this return migration, the male was shot in November in southern Iraq but the other two successfully arrived in the border area between Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The remaining two females started their northward journey again in the first week of April 2013 using almost the same migratory route to Kazakhstan via Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as in 2012 and settled again in western Kazakhstan for breeding. In autumn 2013 they started moving south by the end of October and over the next two weeks both of them followed almost the same route to a wintering area, 100 km east of the Saudi-Iraqi border in Iraq.

Kazakhstan has the largest breeding population of Asian Houbara Bustard. The satellite tracking of the species will provide further information on the migration pattern, wintering areas, preferred habitat and other ecological information. From these birds we now know that there is individual variation in migration timing, duration, and patterns but departure from wintering grounds is March and early April and they reach their breeding areas in mid April. Travel rate between the wintering and breeding grounds has averaged 67 km/day but one individual managed up to 323 km in a single day. Birds mainly follow steppe areas on migration avoiding the highest elevations. Spring migration tended to last longer than autumn movements. More study is needed to determine the effects of food availability in wintering areas, the effect of meteorological conditions on the migration pattern and if specific stopover areas are used regularly. It is planned to fit a further 15 wild Houbara with satellite transmitters. As part of the study an SWA team investigated habitat in Kazakhstan in the first half of September 2013. A full report on this study is being prepared for publication.

M. Z. ul Islam, A. Boug, S. Alshariri & H. Alsubai, National Wildlife Research Center, P O Box 1086, Taif, Saudi Arabia (mzafarul.islam@gmail.com).

Announcements and Requests for information

14th BCEAW Conference Sharjah February 2013

During four days in February regional ornithologists met in Sharjah for the 14th Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife Conference to consider the conservation status of all the region's breeding birds. The region being the whole of Arabia northwards to Syria and Iraq. Those assembled split into

two teams to consider the approximately 365 species individually. The result was that these species were categorised to as follows:

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| Critically Endangered | 7 |
| Endangered | 13 |
| Vulnerable | 13 |
| Near Threatened | 28 |

A full report is being prepared.

Egyptian Vultures in Djibouti

We have set up a blog about the migration count at Ras Siyyan, Djibouti and the tracking via satellite of an Egyptian Vulture captured in Tadjoura, Djibouti. Those interested can find it at: <http://egyptianvultureddjibouti.blogspot.co.at/>. The tracking effort is collaborative with Hawk Mountain Sanctuary.

Mike McGrady, PhD, Am Rosenhugel 59, A-3500 Krems, Austria (MikeMcGrady@aol.com).

Qatar Bird Records Committee website

The Qatar Bird Records Committee has set up a new website: www.QatarBirds.org. The site is self-explanatory, it has a three-fold purpose:

- ★ To encourage the submission of records to QBRC and to make accessible the up-to-date Qatar List;
- ★ To provide basic useful information for visiting birdwatchers;
- ★ To provide a platform for photographers, researchers and publishers to advertise and link to their work, and for birdwatchers to link to their blogs and albums.

In the initial months the organisers are looking for comment and feedback on the site to help improve it.

QBRC contacts are Neil Morris (tarsiger@ntlworld.com) and Jamie Buchan (jamie_buchan@yahoo.com).

Yousef Mohageb and Arabian Eco Tourism

Yousef Mohageb has been organizing a range of natural history and other specialist tours to Yemen for nearly 20 years and has always been a great help with ABBA surveys there. His company has changed its status recently and is now known as Arabian Eco-tours and Travel (ARETT), it has the same e-mail: aet@y.net.ye and a web site, www.arabian-ecotours.com, is under construction. Yousef can also be contacted by telephone at +967 1 400 149, Fax: 00 967 1 401 967 or mobile at +967 777770024. Postal address is P.O. Box 5420, Sana'a, Yemen. Note that Yousef's company is now able to help with travel to other Arabian countries and it is accredited with IATA, which means he will be able to book flights to and from Arabia and other worldwide destinations.

ABBA and *Phoenix* Notes and Notices

The *Phoenix* Articles and information in *Phoenix* may be freely reproduced for scientific or non-profit purposes, provided appropriate acknowledgement is given to authors and the ABBA project and, where appropriate, project sponsors. Views expressed by authors, including the position of international boundaries on maps or reference to same in the text, do not necessarily reflect those of the Editor. Articles in this issue with no author shown are by the Editor. This newsletter is covered by the Zoological Record prepared by Thomson Zoological Ltd, Innovation Centre, York Science Park, Innovation Way, Heslington, York YO10 5DG, UK. *Phoenix* has been published annually since January 1985 and contains papers, reports, correspondence and announcements on all aspects of Arabian ornithology. Papers are not independently refereed but every effort is made to ensure that content is accurate.

Phoenix is provided free to all current contributors to the ABBA project and is also sent to subscribers and recent correspondents. Copies of each issue are also passed to all natural history and similar groups active in Arabia.

Records needed The 'first phase' of the ABBA project was complete in 2010 when the Atlas was published. However the database is still live and will continue to be added to. The data will also be available to anyone who needs information on Arabian birds or the region for non-commercial purposes. Readers who have records of Arabian birds, however old, and whether published or not, are urged to make contact with the Coordinator. Old records are still particularly relevant as they help to throw light on the history of population changes, range expansions and contractions. Although the ABBA database is primarily concerned with resident and breeding species, it is not only proved breeding information that is required, notes suggesting possible or probable breeding, particularly uncommon or breeding species, are also valuable, as is information on their ecology, prey and predators. Information on exotics and escaped species, ringed birds and habitats is also needed. There is still much scope for collecting breeding bird information even for common species in well trodden areas. Would observers please continue to send in records and information for their local area and remember to copy ABBA report sheets to the local bird recorder (if there is one). Any outstanding report sheets for 2013 or earlier years should be sent in as soon as possible. Individuals wishing to send records to the ABBA project can send them as an email or on a spreadsheet or can ask for an email pack including instructions for contributors, the ABBA record forms, a list of breeding birds and so on. Email Arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com. The ABBA website which is due to be updated, also includes these papers. (<http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/arabian.birds/>)

Back Issues of *Phoenix* Back issues of *Phoenix* (hard copies of Nos 1-29) are available at £2/€3/US\$4 each (or the whole set for £30/€40/US\$50) including postage. Individual copies will not be available after spring 2014 and full sets will probably be discontinued by the end of 2014. It is hoped that the older issues will be available in PDF format in due course. When

ordering back issues please say if you would like an invoice or a receipt. Bank transfers can be made to: (Account name) M C Jennings 00445660, Sort Code 30 94 25, TSB, High Holborn Branch, London. Sometimes banks need the following codes: IBAN: GB40 LOYD 3094 2500 4456 60; BIC: LOYDGB21077. Because of excessive bank charges for handling foreign cheques those not having access to a UK bank account are asked to pay in Sterling (£), Euro (€), US\$ banknotes, or the equivalent in a currency of the Arabian Peninsula.

In Brief

Khor Rouri

Khor Rouri (UA11) has been on the itinerary of every birder visiting Dhofar. During a visit there in April 2013 (ABBA Survey 47) it was difficult to access the site until it was realised that one needs to pay to visit and drive through the archaeological site first. However more disconcerting was that on the beach there was a Navy survey team who advised that they are going to build a jetty there! So it looks ominously like bye bye Khor Rouri as we have all loved it.

The future of Sun Farm Sohar, Oman

Sun Farm Sohar (WB25) has been officially closed down and the dairy has ceased operations. A Grand Mosque is being constructed at the side of the farm adjacent to the main road and the future of the farm land itself is unclear. Until its closure Sun Farm continued to attract a variety of interesting species, including, in 2013, Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*, Lesser Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus*, Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus*, Grey-throated Martin *Riparia chinensis*, Green-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava taivana* Amur Wagtail *Motacilla alba leucopsis*, and the first breeding record of Black-headed Yellow Wagtail *M. f. feldegg*. (John Atkins - johnatko@omantel.net.om).

Palm Jebal Ali UB27: a new ABBA square

Tribulus 20: 67-73 (2012), includes an article 'Four tern species newly recorded breeding in Dubai, UAE' by Keith Wilson. The breeding site is one of the new artificial islands south of Dubai built by dumping thousands of tonnes of rocks in the sea to create residential islands. Because of the financial crash of 2008, the residential parts were still largely undeveloped by 2012, and so being undisturbed the island has proven to be an attractive site for terns to breed. The island in question was the Palm Jebal Ali, north east part of which, situated at 25°01'N, 54°58'E, is in ABBA Square UB27. This square never existed on the ABBA database because there was previously no land or permanent marine structure in it. So Keith has achieved a rather special first - a new ABBA square. So far there are only records of terns breeding on the new island, perhaps someone could check out if any land birds have arrived there yet?

Sooty Falcons fitted with satellite transmitters

In 2013 Mike McGrady and the Oman Sooty Falcon team fitted five Sooty Falcons *Falcon concolor* on Fahal island (YB24), off the coast of northern Oman, with satellite transmitters. The

team invite readers to follow the movements of these birds on the team's blog at: <http://sootyfalcons.blogspot.co.at/>. Viewers can leave comments on the blog or ask questions, can return often to watch the falcons' progress and pass the link on to anyone else who might be interested. Feedback would be appreciated by the team. (Mike McGrady, PhD, Am Rosenhügel 59, A-3500 Krems, Austria - MikeJMcGrady@aol.com).

Bubiyan Island Kuwait

Khaled Al Nasrallah has been visiting Bubiyan Island (OA36) for many years and recording the birdlife. During 2012 he recorded the following breeding birds:

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* 750-1000 nests; eggs Feb - May
Western Reef Heron *Egretta gularis* 750-1000 nests; eggs Feb- May
Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* 250-400 nests; eggs Mar - May
Slender-billed Gull *Larus genei* 1200 nests; eggs Mar- May
Gull-billed Tern *Sterna nilotica* 300-400 nests; eggs Feb -Apr
Caspian Tern *S. caspia* 200-300 nests(one colony); eggs Mar-May
Swift Tern *S. bergii*; 500 nests.
Lesser Crested Tern *S. bengalensis* Mixed colony with Swift Tern

Khor Kalba - UAE's Third Ramsar Site

The UAE designated its third Ramsar 'Wetland of International Importance' on 10 March 2013. Mangrove and Alhafeya National Protected Area in Khor Kalba (WA27), in the emirate of Sharjah has an area of 1,494 hectares and is located on the east coast near the border with Oman. It comprises coastal subtidal, intertidal (sand beach, mangroves, mud and tidal channels), supratidal (sand, salt marsh and saline flats), as well as encompassing a narrow alluvial plain dominated by *Acacia* woodland. The *Avicennia marina* mangrove trees found in Kalba are the tallest, the most extensive and mature woodland in the UAE. The mangroves provide breeding, nursery and feeding grounds for several fish and invertebrate species, besides protecting the coastline from storm damage and erosion, while trapping sediments washed off the land.

The critically endangered Hawksbill turtles *Eretmochelys imbricata* and endangered Green turtles *Chelonia mydas* can be observed near the mouth of the mangrove's inlet, entering the creeks at high tide to feed on sea grasses and algae. The area is of great ornithological interest, and an endemic subspecies, the White-collared Kingfisher *Todiramphus chloris kalbaensis*, breeds almost exclusively at this site, which is also one of just two breeding localities in the region for Sykes's Warbler *Hippolais rama*. The management and monitoring of this site is carried out with the involvement of the local residents, and an educational visitor centre is planned.

Kazakhstani Social Plover gets to northern Arabia

The Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius* team in Kazakhstan, which is sponsored by BirdLife and the RSPB, reports that an autumn bird moved to near Tabuk (CB33) in north west Saudi Arabia, an area where there have been other reports of the species in the past. It looks like pivot farms are found very agreeable by the species. See the blog for details and updates: <http://www.birdlife.org/sociable-lapwing/2013/11/irina-reaches-saudi-arabia/>. It will be interesting to see if this bird stays

at this location over the winter, or continues either further in the Arabian Peninsula or moves on to Sudan. (Project coordinator Rob Sheldon - Robert.Sheldon@rspb.org.uk).

Arabian Scops Owl *Otus pamela*

A recent issue of *Ibis** the journal of the British Ornithologists Union, included a paper looking at the affinities of scops owls of the Arabian region and Africa. On the basis of phylogenetic, morphological and vocal data the authors concluded that the Socotra Scops Owl was supported as a full species *Otus socotranus*, that the Arabian Scops Owl, previously regarded by many as a race of the African Scops Owl *O. senegalensis*, was sufficiently distinct to be elevated to species status as *O. pamela*. The Pallid Scops Owl *O. brucei* of eastern Arabia is more closely related to Indo-malayan taxa than to Palearctic or African scops owls. The Socotra Scops Owl was originally described as a separate species in 1899 but in the later part of the 20th Century it got lumped as a subspecies of the African Scops Owl. Its closest relatives are in the Indo-malayan region and the Seychelles. The Atlas followed the original nomenclature for Socotra Scops, however the recommended elevation of *pamela* to species status gives Arabia another endemic species.

* Pons, J.M., G.M. Kirwan, R.F. Porter & J. Fuchs. 2013. A reappraisal of the systematic affinities of the Socotran, Arabian and East African scops owls (*Otus*, Strigidae) using a combination of molecular, biometrics, and acoustic data. *Ibis* 155: 518-533.

Recent Reports

Thanks to all those who have sent in records to the ABBA database over the last 12 months and especially to the various country recorders for their input.

The following are a selection of some of the more interesting, unexpected or unusual records of Arabian birds received during the last year. Records are from 2013 unless noted otherwise. Not all records here have been verified or accepted by local recorders. Notes after the name of the observer are editorial comment and not necessarily be part of the original report. It is often difficult to give the right credit or attribution for every record. The names shown refer more to those sending in the records and not necessarily those who might have recorded the occurrence in the first place. So apologies if records could have been more correctly attributed. Comments and corrections are always welcome, so that the ABBA database entry can be amended. Some of these records have been sent in by a third party or have been extracted from websites, publications or other sources.

Chukar *Alectoris chukar* One Wadi Berediyah, a tributary of Wadi Wurrayah (WA27), UAE, 29 April 2006 (Christophe Tourenq). Chukars are rarely reported away from the Musandam Peninsula (Oman). Most of the introductions in the UAE are thought to have died out and so this one may have been indigenous.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Ten ducklings Jahra Pool reserve

(NB35) Kuwait, 16 April (Mike Pope). First breeding Kuwait.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca* Four ducklings 12 April, Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) Kuwait. Ducklings and juveniles present until July (Jasim Judaa). First breeding Kuwait.

Abdim's Stork *Ciconia abdimii* Nesting on a telecom tower 19 May, near Ad Darb (1A12) Tihama, Saudi Arabia (Bob Tovey).

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* Two 3 July on nests at Abu Arish pools (IB10). Second breeding site in Arabia. The same day there were ten at the Sabya sewage pools (IB11), where the species was first found breeding in 2010, and 50 nearby at Malaki lake (Phil Roberts)

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* Recently fledged juvenile 26 May next to an adult at Ruwais (SB25), western UAE, the species is always present at the site (Khalifa al Dhahcri). Juveniles 29 June at Warsen pits (VA27), Dubai, and adult taking food to a nest site in reeds. First breeding at this site (Jacky Judas).

Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii* One July Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) Kuwait. Second record for Kuwait (Mike Pope).

Black-headed Heron *Ardea melanocephala* One 19 November, Sabya sewage pools (IB11), Saudi Arabia (Phil Roberts).

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* One May and June, Wathba (UB25), Abu Dhabi (Oscar Campbell).

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* An example of the African race *lugubris* at Khormaksar (LA02) near Aden, Yemen 15 December to 4 February 1948 (Peter Browne). This race rarely reported in Arabia.

Socotra Cormorant *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* The colony on Sinaiya island (VB28) Umm al Qiwayn, UAE is predated by feral cats which eat small pink chicks when not supervised by adults in the crèching phase. Red Foxes predated chicks of all sizes and also adults (Sonja Benjamin). On Bahrain the long time breeding colony on Suwad al Janubiyah island, which lies to the east of the main Hawar island, has moved entirely to Rubud al Sharqiyah island (all QB28) off the northern tip of Hawar island (Howard King). No explanation has been put forward yet for the move but tourist pressure from the hotel on the main island may be a reason.

Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* Two 6 June in a wide wadi with extensive agriculture in the vicinity of Al Shugayri (IB11), south west Saudi Arabia at about 100 m elevation. There was no indication of breeding - just two birds together in the same place. (Louis Regenmorter and Brian James).

Common Coot *Fulica atra* Up to four chicks in June, Wathba (UB25) Abu Dhabi (Oscar Campbell).

Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* Two adults and

young 25 April, Wathba (UB25) Abu Dhabi (Oscar Campbell).

Common Buttonquail *Turnix sylvaticus* Singles on 3 July at two sites near Malaki lake (IB11) south west Saudi Arabia (Phil Roberts and Jem Babbington).

Cream-coloured courser *Cursorius cursor* A pair, 3 April, on gravel near the Khor Rouri (UA11) Dhofar, looked as if they were breeding nearby (Mike Jennings).

Lesser Flamingo *Phoeniconaias minor* About 3000, 29 August, Hodeidah mangroves (IB06). (David Stanton and Mike Jennings).

White-cheeked Tern *Sterna repressa* One Ringed as a chick 21 July 2009 (ring no SR89597) was caught at same colony at Motallah Bay (QA28) Bahrain, 15 June 2013 (Abdullah al Kaabi).

European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* A bird shot 30 April 2013, near Tabuk (CB33), northern Saudi Arabia, had been ringed on Bahrain (QA28) 13 July 2012 (Abdullah al Kaabi).

Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri* Observed at Steamer Point (KB02) Aden, Yemen on 5 & 28 October 1946, also February, October and November 1947, mostly single birds but two birds in November 1947 (Peter Browne). These are the first records of this species from Arabia with a confirmed identification and a precise date and place. A record from the northern UAE in 1945 of 'parakeets' has also recently come to light. On 14 February 2013 a pair were disputing a hole in a Ghaf tree *Prosopis cineraria* near Labbab (VB27) UAE, with a pair of **Indian Rollers *Coracias benghalensis***. It seemed as if the former were ejecting the latter from a very desirable nest site (Mike Jennings).

Jacobin Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* A cuckoo which had all its feathers and no remaining down, but with an apparently shorter tail than adults seen recently by the same observer, was present in a small wadi at about 2400 m below Mount Soudah (IA13) in the Asir Region, Saudi Arabia, 5 July. The bird was assumed to be a recently fledged young. It was integrated into a family group of **Arabian Babblers *Turdoides squamiceps*** of 6-10 individuals although it included no obvious juveniles. The cuckoo moved with the flock through the trees and bushes. It shared the same space and perched on the same branches with various babblers but it was not seen to be fed by a babbler. It was possibly old enough to feed itself and was close to leaving the family. The babblers did not mob or scold the cuckoo (Louis Regenmorter). This is the best evidence received of confirmed breeding of this cuckoo in Arabia since the start of the ABBA project.

Desert Eagle Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* Pair at a nest with five young 24 March, in NB34, southern Kuwait (Humoud al Shayji).

Little Owl *Athene noctua* At least three heard calling at one spot in Wadi Wurrayah (WA27) UAE (Mike Jennings).

Nubian Nightjar *Caprimulgus uubicus* Two birds in a small natural wadi near Abu Arish (IB10) at about 150 m elevation, 16 May. Both could fly but one appeared smaller than the other and it was assumed this was a juvenile with an adult. The larger bird appeared to grow agitated on approach. (Louis Regenmorter and Mansur al Fahad).

Fork-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus adsimilis* One Steamer Point (KB02) Aden, Yemen 28 October 1946 (Peter Browne). Notes, drawing and description available. First record for Arabia of a species that occurs widely and commonly in the Horn of Africa.

House Crow *Corvus splendens* On 21 September two came on board a ship when just north of the Hanish Islands (IB04) as it moved south in the Red Sea. They left the ship when passing the Bab al Mandab (JA02) Yemen (Kevin Brewer).

Mesopotamian Crow *Corvus (corone) capellanus* One Umm al Qiwain (VB28) UAE, November 2012 - January 2013, seen by a number of observers. The second Arabian record - this occurrence overlapped with the first record in Kuwait (*Phoenix* 29:1)

Greater Short-toed Lark *Calandrella brachydactyla* Nine joined a ship about 92 km (50 nm) off the Gujarat coast, India and three remained on board six days later whilst transiting the Red Sea. They were fed on breadcrumbs (Kevin Brewer).

Lesser Short-toed Lark *Calandrella rufescens* Juvenile food begging 28 April, Irkayya farm (RA27) Qatar (Neil Morris).

White-cheeked Bulbul *Pycnonotus leucogenys* This species is spreading well south in central Oman, it was present in the southern part of the Wadi Halfayn (YA19) 31 March (Mike Jennings). Range extension.

Nile Valley Sunbird *Hedydipna metallica* Feeding at a bird table in Jeddah (FA19) took peanut butter and honey from a bun (Duha al Hashemi).

Dead Sea Sparrow *Passer moabiticus* One 4 March, Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35) Kuwait (*Sandgrouse* 35: 161-164). 15th record for Kuwait.

Rüppell's Weaver *Ploceus galbula* Two males and two females 7 April 2011, nest building Green Island (OA35) Kuwait City (Massimiliano Dettori).

Baya *Ploceus philippinus* and Streaked Weavers *P. manyar* Pairs in Wadi Hanifah (MB25) south of Riyadh 11 and 12 April (Mohammed al Nager). These species continue to be recorded in the Riyadh area but it remains unclear as to whether they have established viable colonies.

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* A juvenile Dubai pivot fields (VA27) 22 June (Oscar Campbell).

Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagiuus* Observed and singing at two sites in Wadi Wurrayah (WA27) and at another site nearby, 10-12 February (Mike Jennings).

Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* Nest building 14 February at Azzore, near Khiran (OA34) Kuwait, six birds present there 21 February, eggs photographed (Omar al Shaheen).

Saja/Umm Ar-Rimth Protected Area central Saudi Arabia: important for birds

Saja/Umm Ar-Rimth Protected Area (IA21) is a 6581 km² north eastern extension to the existing Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area. It has a core area of about 10% (567 km²). The area is comprised of undulating sand plains and basalt/gravel hills, rockier in the south and flatter and sandier with granite outcrops in the north. The general altitude of the plain is about 950-1000 m but some of the hills rise to around 1200 m. There are large areas of *Haloxylon salicornicum* and perennial grasses and scattered *Acacia* trees and bushes in the north. There is a more diverse vegetation in the southern hills, with more trees and bushes of *Acacia* sp, *Maerua crassifolia* and *Lycium shawii*.

The establishment in 2001 of the Saja/Umm ar-Rimth area in central Saudi Arabia marked the start of a new approach to reserve management for the Saudi Wildlife Authority. The aim for the management of the protected area was to integrate local development needs with conservation objectives, principally through the establishment of regulated grazing regimes. In addition, a small fenced portion (400 km²) of the reserve was set aside to become a second reintroduction site for the Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii*. Saja reserve is also a refuge for migrant houbara wintering in the area and a seasonal dispersal area for houbara released into the Mahazat as-Sayd reserve. Saja is also an important foraging zone for Lappet-faced Vultures *Torgos tracheliotos* breeding in Mahazat as-Sayd. In addition to houbara the reserve is a potential re-introduction site for Red-necked Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, gazelle *Gazella* sp. and Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx*.

Houbara re-introduction was started in 2004, in the period 2004 - 2013 more than 300 have been released. Unfortunately the survival rate has been low. Hunting around the fenced releasing site is prevalent and when houbara disperse from the release site they can easily fall prey to hunters outside. The breeding success of released birds is also probably low as only one young bird has been recorded in Saja.

In the period since April 2006 some 68 bird species have been recorded in and around the fenced area of Saja /Umm Ar-Rimth Protected Area, these include the endangered Eastern Imperial Eagle *Aquila heliaca*. Residents include Barbary Falcon *Falco peregrinoides*, Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* and Long-legged Buzzard *Buteo rufinus* and seven lark species of which Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* and Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* are the most abundant. Six species of wheatear have been recorded including Desert Wheatear *Oenanthe deserti*, and Isabelline Wheatear *O. isabellina* which are common in winter. The reserve area also holds a significant population of Rüppell's Fox *Vulpes rueppelli*, Sand cat *Felis margarita harrisoni*, and Spiny-tailed Lizard *Uromastix aegyptius microlepis*.

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Egyptian Vultures in the Farasan Islands, Saudi Arabia

The Farasan Islands (HB10, IA10) are an archipelago of over 170 islands of uplifted coral reef in the southern Red Sea, lying 40 km offshore from Jizan, Saudi Arabia. There are two main islands within the group, Farasan Kebir and Seged. The islands have a rich visible wildlife which include hundreds of Idmi (Mountain) Gazelle *Gazella gazella*, dolphins and large waterbirds such as Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus roseus*, Pink-backed Pelican *Pelicanus rufescens*, Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia*, Goliath Heron *Ardea goliath* and Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*. Migrating birds join the many resident seabirds in spring and autumn. The protected area conserves key representative habitats among the islands and coastal waters of the southern Red Sea.

One of the key breeding birds on the main Farasan islands is the Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus*. BirdLife International (2012) has categorised this species as Endangered due to a recent and extremely rapid population decline in India (presumably resulting from poisoning by the veterinary drug Diclofenac), severe long-term declines in Europe (>50% over the last three generations [42 years]) and West Africa and ongoing declines through much of the rest of its African range.

The most important breeding population of Egyptian Vulture in Saudi Arabia is in the Farasan Islands. During field surveys in recent years concentrating on Farasan gazelle populations, using road counts and aerial surveys, all sightings of Egyptian Vultures have been recorded on an opportunistic basis. The surveys on Farasan Kebir occurred between 2011 and 2013. In May 2011 a total of 76 vultures were recorded; in January 2012 there were 63; in June 2012 there were 69 and in January 2013 there were 56.

On each of the above occasions the breeding population was estimated to be of the order of 40-70 pairs with an overall population of about 150-200 birds. This is with a 95% confidence level.

During the surveys the species was mainly recorded near human habitations, especially food rich sites such as refuse areas, markets, animal pens, chicken farms and places near where fishermen process their catch.

A detailed vulture specific survey on the island is planned in winter 2013-2014. Saudi Arabia holds a significant proportion of the Egyptian Vulture population within its protected areas, like the Farasan islands but no national survey has been completed to date. To achieve a better understanding of the population and as an aid to longer term conservation measures, we recommend that a national species action plan for Saudi Arabia should be developed, it would include the following:

- ★ A country-wide survey of the species should be conducted and the survey repeated at intervals in the future.
- ★ A number of the species should be trapped and fitted with satellite transmitters to study juvenile dispersion from the different breeding areas, migratory movements and wintering

areas.

★ The species needs to receive special protection on the important Farasan Islands site and nests need to be guarded by the SWA rangers.

★ A more detailed study is needed to understand the population decline, determine what are the limiting factors on breeding birds and what the requirements are for wintering areas of the species in Saudi Arabia.

★ Detailed ecological and behavioural studies.

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Ringed White Stork found on Bahrain in 1942 finally tracked down

The June 1997 newsletter of the Bahrain Natural History Society included at page 2 a short note by Osama al Thawadi headed 'From the archives' which referred back to 4 September 1942 when the local papers reported an 'invasion of storks' possibly as many as 200 over the refinery (QB29). Such a large count of White Storks *Ciconia ciconia* in the Gulf is probably unprecedented and has not been repeated. One stork was found dead at the refinery at the time. If carried a ring inscribed 'Universite Kaunas Lithuanie B 3973'. There was no further information about the ringed bird. It probably would have been impossible to check the details of ringing in 1942 as Europe was engulfed in war and even after the end of WW2 the situation is unlikely to have improved because Lithuania was by then within the USSR's sphere of interest, which was notoriously uncooperative about bird ringing.

I wrote to the BNHS about this article in the late 1990's to try to obtain more details for the ABBA ringed birds data file but nothing further came out. In 2013 I found the original papers again and decided to have another go at chasing up the recovery, this time directly with the Lithuanian ringing authorities. Two emails in spring and summer went unanswered and in the end I involved EURING, the umbrella European ringing authority who very kindly contacted the Lithuanian ringing scheme on my behalf and I was finally presented with the original ringing details.

The bird was ringed as a nestling within two weeks of 15 July 1942 at Palėvėnė in the Kupiškio region (about 55°48'12"N, 24°52'45"E) by Petras Pišnius. The ringing location is 3892 km from the recovery site.

Storks have been ringed all over mainland Europe from at least early in the 20th Century and this is not the oldest ringed stork recovered in Arabia but it is very nice to finally get the details. Of the 20 recoveries of ringed White Storks in Arabia, they mostly originate in Germany, Poland and western Russia but almost every state from Denmark to Bulgaria has produced individuals.

Mike Jennings



Clockwise from top left:

A brood of Desert Eagle owlets *Bubo ascalaphus* under a granite rock in Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area (HB21), 1 April 2013. This is the first time the species has been confirmed to breed in the protected area, the brood of six is unprecedented in Arabia. See page 12. (Photo: Khairi Ismail).

Second calendar year female Crested Honey Buzzard *Perisoreus ptilorhynchus* with Fan-tailed Raven *Corvus rhipidurus*, Tanumah Park (IA14), Asir, Saudi Arabia, 5 July 2013. See page 13. (Photo Jem Babbington).

A Collared Pratincole showing a white trailing edge to the wing, Sabkhat Al Fasl (PB30), Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, 26 April 2013.

A Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* lacking white trailing edge to the wing, same date and place. See page 13. (Photos: Jem Babbington).



Desert Eagle-Owl breeding in Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area, central Saudi Arabia

The Desert Eagle-Owl *Bubo ascalaphus* is known to breed widely in central and other parts of Saudi Arabia (Jennings, 2010) but it has never been recorded breeding in the extensive Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area (HB21, 1A21). Since 1991 the Mahazat has been an important re-introduction site for several threatened species that include Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx*, Sand Gazella *subgutturosa* and Mountain gazelles *G. gazella*, Asian Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii* and Red-necked Ostrich *Struthio camelus*. It holds a very important population of Lappet-faced Vulture *Torgos tracheliotos* (Shobrak, 1996) and is an Important Bird Area under Birdlife/IUCN criteria.

This owl has been recorded in the reserve in late autumn and early winter but on 1 April 2013, we found six nestlings of this owl under a large rock in the reserve at 22°23' N, 41°49'E and an adult was present nearby (photo page 11). This record is exceptional as there has never even been a record of a clutch of six eggs recorded in Arabia before, so six nestlings is quite remarkable when it is considered that almost always with this species, eggs will be lost or infertile and chicks will die. The chicks were observed for a week in the area and after that they disappeared. It seems likely that an unknown predator is responsible for the missing nestlings because they would not have fledged in such a short period.

With this report the number of proven breeding birds in this plains reserve stands at 24, out of a total of 201 recorded species within the Mahazat as-Sayd Protected Area.

References: ● Jennings, M C. 2010. Atlas of the breeding birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia*: 25. ● Shobrak, M. 1996. *Ecology of the lappet-faced vulture in Mahazat as-Sayd reserve, Saudi Arabia*. Unpublished Doctor of Philosophy Thesis, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 194pp.

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Collared Pratincoles in Saudi Arabia lacking white trailing-edge to wing

By Jem Babbington

Whilst birding at Sabkhat Al Fasl (PB30), Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia in April 2013 I saw a flock of ten Collared Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* with at least three birds lacking the normal white trailing edge to the secondaries. The first bird lacking the white trailing edge was seen on close inspection to have rufous underwing coverts, making it a Collared or Oriental Pratincole *G. maldivarum*. The lack of white trailing edge and rufous underwing coverts are features of Oriental Pratincole so I took a few photographs of the bird. One with its wings stretched showed clearly the lack of a white trailing edge

to the secondaries (page 11). The bird then flew and was joined by the other birds, all of which seemed to be Collared Pratincoles, although two more also lacked the white trailing edge. A few were typical Collared Pratincoles with long tails and a broad white trailing edge to the wing in flight. When resting on the ground there did not appear to be any difference in size, plumage or colouration between any of the birds and as a result I came to the conclusion that they were all Collared Pratincoles. Oriental Pratincole has not been recorded in Saudi Arabia but I thought I should get a second opinion on my identification. I sent some photos of these birds for comments to a few people with extensive knowledge of the species including Gerald Driessens, Lars Svensson and Brian Small. Gerald and Lars are the authors of an excellent identification paper on Collared and Oriental Pratincoles (Driessens, G & Svensson, L. 2005. Identification of Collared Pratincole and Oriental Pratincole – a critical review of characters. *Dutch Birding* 27: 1-35). Although the birds clearly lacked a white-trailing edge to the wing other pointers indicated they were Collared Pratincoles. For example the tail pattern where the fanned tail shows a small amount (20%) of black on the outer tail feather on the Oriental compared to usually about 50% on the Collared Pratincole; which could be seen on the those birds without white-trailing edge to the wing in flight. Other pointers towards Collared Pratincole were white primary shaft streaks, the breast band not grading broadly onto the underparts, the pale tips of the secondaries are too washed out and there is too much merging with the dark part of the feather. On Oriental, you see a sharp demarcation with the pale fringe (if there is a fringe in the first place). The conclusion from all parties was that the birds are Collared Pratincoles but these pictures certainly show that you need very good views of a vagrant bird before coming to the conclusion it is an Oriental Pratincole.

Surprisingly quite a few (about 25%) of the Collared Pratincoles I have seen in spring in Saudi Arabia appear to lack an obvious white trailing edge to the wing. As a result I also wondered if these birds were one of the African sub-species, *G. p. erlangeri*, *G. p. fuelleborni* and *G. p. riparia*, known as 'Afrotropical Pratincola' in the Driessens & Svensson paper. They were obviously not because the bill and head patterns of these should look more like Oriental Pratincole and the necklaee should have a less obvious pale inner throat surround to the black border, which was not shown by these birds, even though they showed a long black gape line stripe. Gerald Driessens mentioned he was able to find some skins with a very narrow white-trailing edge to the wings, and some with completely worn off trailing edges. This was not the case with the birds I saw as they were in fresh plumage. Since seeing the birds I have found a comment on similar birds seen near Riyadh by Per Anders Bertilsson in his privately published Saudi Arabia bird report 1998-2001 where on 28 April 2000 he saw three individuals at Thumamah (MB27). Two of these, totally lacked the white trailing edge to the wings and appeared darker above with black underwing coverts. On closer inspection he could see a suffusion of red-brown on the underwing and the length of the tail also supported that they were Collared Pratincoles. From longer distances, individuals like this may very well be misidentified as Black-winged Pratincoles *G. nordmanni*. It would certainly be very interesting to know the origin of these different looking or

aberrant Saudi Arabian birds.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Gerald Driessens, Brian Small and Lars Svensson for their thoughts on these interesting birds.

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Crested Honey Buzzard – Another summer record from Saudi Arabia

Information on the occurrence of the Crested Honey Buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus* in Saudi Arabia is limited, with the latest field guide to the region, Porter & Aspinall (2010), stating it is a vagrant to the country. Recent records suggest that the species is in fact a scarce passage migrant and winter visitor that also occurs rarely in summer. Most records from the west coast are in autumn and winter and those from the Eastern Province in winter and spring. The first records for Saudi Arabia were a second calendar year bird at the Raydah Escarpment in the Asir mountains near Abha (IA13), Asir Province, on 11 October 1994, with another second calendar year bird 5-10 kilometres south at Wadi Maraba on the same day. Both of these birds were in an extremely exhausted state with one being taken into care and subsequently released (Symens et al., 1996). Brian Meadows (pers comm) recorded a number of honey buzzard *Pernis* sp between 25 May 1988 and 21 January 2004 in landscaped areas within the city of Jubail (PB31) in the Eastern Province, with birds on 6 January 1999 and 25 February 1999 seen well enough to be confident that they were Crested Honey Buzzards. Since this time records have become more frequent although there is only one documented summer record from the country of an adult male at Dhahran (QA29), Eastern Province on 30 July 2011 (Babbington, 2012). On 5 July 2013 I found a second calendar year female Crested Honey Buzzard at Tanumah Park (IA14), Asir Province, being mobbed by a Fan-tailed Raven *Corvus rhipidurus* (photo page 11). I identified it as second calendar year from the pale cere, the dark 'fingers', the tail pattern and the pattern of retained secondaries, and as a female from the moulted primary pattern, the pale iris and tail pattern. It was moulting its inner primaries with the innermost primaries new on both wings, while P5 was missing (possibly growing or still to grow) giving the bird a wing formula like a European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*. This is only the second documented record of the species in summer in Saudi Arabia and is in a region more than 1250 kilometres from the Eastern Province where the previous summer record was observed. As all *pernis* migrate with active wing moult, it is not possible to know if the bird summered in the region or was an early migrant although the date would make it an extremely early migrant. The record is also interesting as there appear to be only two further records from the south west, a second calendar year male in February 2012 and an adult male in December 2012 at Najran (KA11), Rob Tovey (pers comm). It is not clear if some Crested Honey Buzzards spend the entire year in Saudi Arabia but if they do

comments by Brian Meadows (pers comm) are particularly interesting. After seeing his first Crested Honey Buzzard in Jubail it occurred to him that the species might be visiting the nests of honey bees as he had found a bee nest in a nearby acacia tree a few days earlier. Subsequently he had kept records of every bee nest he found from 1988 until July 2004 and it was clear from the results that bee nests, an important potential food source, could be found in every month of the year (between two and six bee nests each calendar month). But he added he never saw a Crested Honey Buzzards raiding a bee nest.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Andrea Corso for his comments on the identification and aging of the Crested Honey Buzzard at Tanumah, Brian Meadows for additional details on the species from the Eastern Province and Rob Tovey for supplying details of two Crested Honey Buzzards from south west Saudi Arabia.

References: ● Babbington, J. 2012. Crested Honey Buzzard – A summer record from Saudi Arabia. *Phoenix* 28: 17.
● Porter, R. F. & S. Aspinall. 2010. *Birds of the Middle East :Second Edition*. Christopher Helm. London. ● Symens, P., P. Gaucher and T. Wachter. 1996. Crested Honey-Buzzards in Saudi Arabia in October 1994. *Dutch Birding* 18:126-129.

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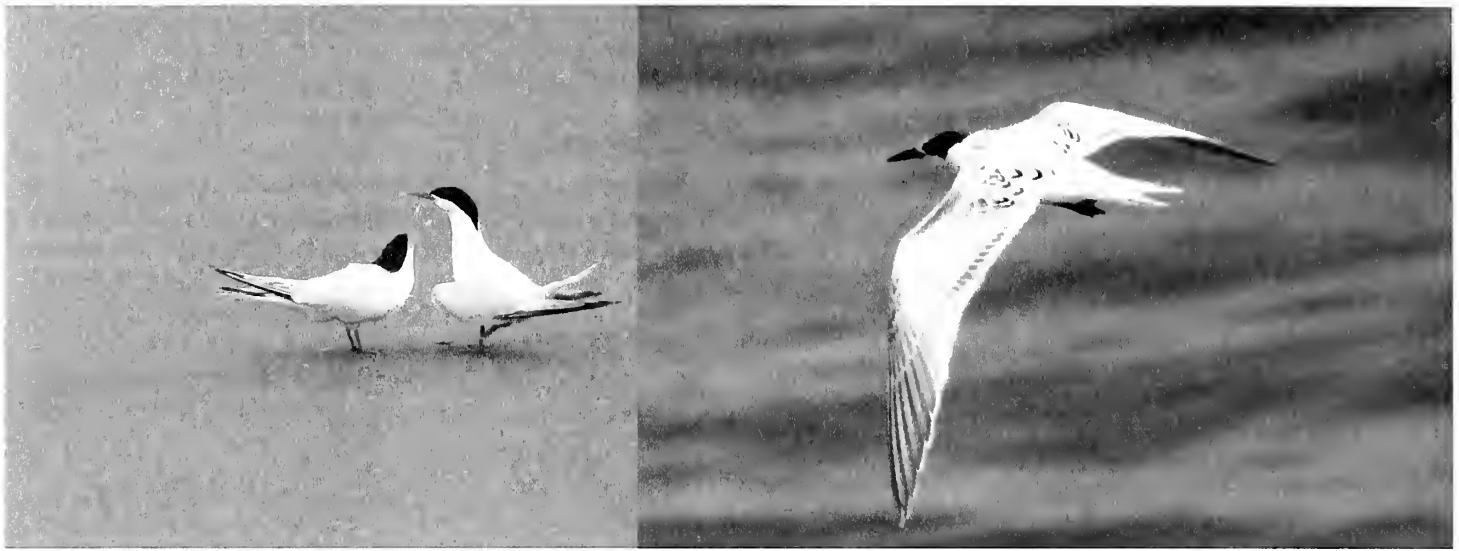
Letter to the Editor:

From Brian Meadows (September 2013)

I was disappointed to learn from the note on Sabkhat al Fasl and the photograph of flamingoes by Phil Roberts in *Phoenix* 29, that shooting appears to have become rampant at this Important Bird Area. One reason I put forward for the site being such an attraction for large numbers of wintering Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* (my paper in *Phoenix* 28), was the protection from excessive shooting and the relatively undisturbed nature of Sabkhat al Fasl. In north west Europe Common Shelduck numbers are known to have increased significantly following restrictions on hunting. Common Shelduck numbers have been low during the past decade on Sabkhat al Fasl and Jem Babbington has also informed me that he has never seen any Ruddy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea* at the site.

One other point - while I agree that the Turkestan Shrike *Lanius (isabellinus) phoenicuroides* is a common passage migrant (both spring and autumn) most of the red-tailed shrikes I found wintering at Jubail were considered to be Nubian Shrikes *Lanius (isabellinus) isabellinus* (Bull. B.O.C. 2010. 130(3)). The status of the two species (or races) is apparently similar to the latest assessment by Tommy Pederson and the late Simon Aspinall for the United Arab Emirates (*Sandgrouse* 2010: Supplement 3)

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Clockwise from top left:

A few Roseate Terns *Sterna dougalli* were found on the UAE east coast (WA27) from early September to early October 2013, the first for many years. Two adults on the beach, one in a subservient begging posture, possibly indicating they were a pair. Food begging juveniles were also present however feeding of juvenile terns by adults is not a good indication of local breeding but nevertheless an intriguing record. A juvenile in flight. See page 16. (Photos Osear Campbell and Mark Smiles)

This Egyptian Nightjar *Caprimulgus aegyptius* was photographed by Mohammed Al Mazrouie at Ajban Farms (UB26), UAE on 16 June 2013. Ajban lies between Abu Dhabi and Dubai and is approximately 20 kilometres inland from the Arabian Gulf coast. It comprises small orchards and arable plots, many of which have been abandoned and are reverting to scrubby desert dominated by, for example, Tamarisk *Tamarix* sp. Reference to *Birds of the Western Palearctic on interactive DVD-ROM, Vers 2.0.1* (Birdguides/Oxford University Press, 2008) clearly indicates that this is a juvenile and, although it seems very likely that the bird was bred locally, the Emirates Bird Records Committee erred on the side of caution and concluded that it was impossible to absolutely rule out dispersal of a juvenile from elsewhere, including from beyond the UAE. However, Ajban now has a series of intriguing records of this species, which has been recorded singing elsewhere in the UAE, and the possibility of breeding, whilst still unconfirmed, remains high. Submitted by Osear Campbell (ojcampbell25@yahoo.com)

The Southern Red Bishop *Euplectes orix* has occurred in small numbers in the UAE, notably Abu Dhabi (UA25) and Dubai (VA27), since 1988. Like most escapes it attracts little serious attention and its status is not really clear. It is thought likely to breed but no indisputable confirmation has been obtained yet. Male at Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club, April 2013. See page 17. (Photo: Osear Campbell).



HOW TO SUBMIT RECORDS TO THE ABBA PROJECT

The Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia project collects data on the distribution, breeding, numbers, ecology and movements of Arabia resident or breeding species. It welcomes single records as well as bundles of old archives and detailed notes. Full instructions and formats are available for potential contributors to the project but if you just want to send in a few records without getting too involved with procedures then these can be sent in as part of an email (address below) or by attaching a spreadsheet of your year or trip records etc. The basic essentials are a correct identification and an accurate date and place for the record. Short or longer notes giving more details about the record, will enrich the value of the database.

An ideal record consists of:

- Species
- Location
- An indication of breeding activity
- Date (day month year)
- Notes explaining the event

The instructions for contributors are available at the address below if you want to provide a complete record.

- The instructions include a complete list of Arabian breeding birds with short notes on breeding and range and a code for each species.
- For spatial distribution Arabia is divided into half

degree squares, the basic unit of distribution. The instructions explain how to identify the correct square - see the map below.

- So that maps and other outputs can be prepared records are categorised as 'possible', 'probable' or 'confirmed' breeding by a breeding evidence code, reflecting the actual breeding activity noted.

But none of these are essential for miscellaneous or casual records as the coding can be added in the office.

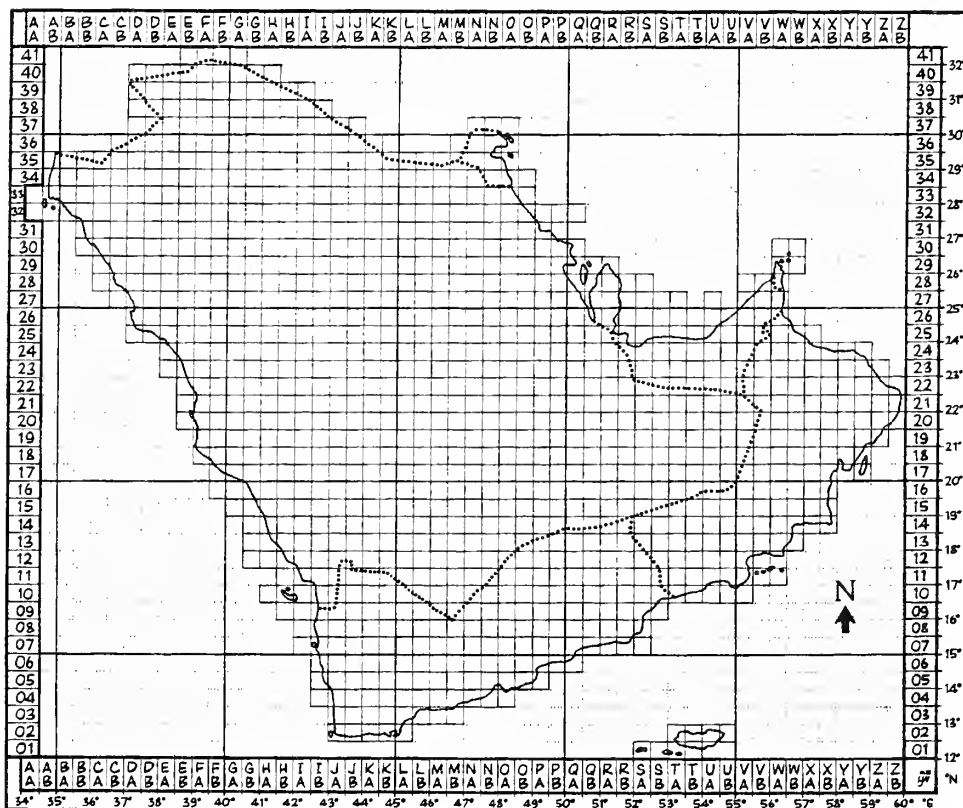
The ABBA database also collects information from published sources including grey literature, museum collections, public archives, national recorders in Arabia and blogs and websites. However this dragnet is not 100% foolproof so those with knowledge of records in obscure places are asked to forward details or alert the coordinator to the source.

Who wants the data?

The project has always worked on the principle that everything on the ABBA database is available to anyone who needs it. For example an individual who needs information for a personal project on a species or locality they are researching. Bespoke datasets can be prepared for almost any requirement. Since the project started in 1984 ABBA has contributed a large quantity of information to every relevant handbook and field guide for the region. If individuals need information on

a species or a region they are especially interested in it can often be sent by return email. The database includes for example virtually everything published on Arabian birds and this can be extremely helpful for historical studies.

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Rub al Khali records

The central core of the Rub al Khali (the Empty Quarter) is still relatively un-atlased with 90 odd squares, that's about 300,000 square kilometres, totally unreported at the time of the publication of the atlas in 2010. Visits by ornithologists to this region are few and far between so it was a cause of some excitement that Chris Bolland of the Environmental Department of Saudi Aramco was able to visit and report on a trip to the core area in November 2012. Chris sent records from 18 atlas squares and of these no less than five had never been reported on before; QB22, RA21, RB22, RB19 and RB15. There were a further eight squares where there were only old records, such as from Thomas's, Philby's and Thesiger's pioneer crossings of the 'sands' in the first half of the 20th Century, but nothing had been reported from them since the start of the ABBA project in 1984. The most commonly reported bird was the Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis*, there were also a few records of Crested Lark *Galerida cristatus*, Greater Hoopoe Lark *Alaemon alaudipes* and regulars like Southern Grey Shrike *Lanius meridionalis* (probably wintering *palidirostris*), Black-crowned Sparrow Lark *Eremopterix nigriceps* and Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*. His party saw tracks of Houbara *Chlamydotis macqueenii*, probably a wintering individual, and a few Spotted Sandgrouse *Pterocles senegallus* at a waterhole. At one of the several wetlands in the Rub al Khali, created from overflowing artesian wells opened up during oil exploration years ago, dozens of Olivaceous Hippolais *hippolaïs pallida* and Eurasian Reed Warblers *Acrocephalus scirpaceus* were present. This suggests that local breeding birds may be resident - or do other more northern populations come to Arabia for the winter?

An unexpected influx of Roseate Terns in the UAE

By Oscar Campbell and Mark Smiles

Of the twelve species of sea tern regularly breeding in Arabia, the cosmopolitan Roseate Tern *Sterna dougalli*, is one of the least numerous and certainly the least frequently observed. Within the region, breeding is known only from Oman, mainly from scattered island sites near Muscat (XB24, YA24) and in the proximity of Masirah Island (YB18). Numbers are small and probably vary a great deal from year to year, with perhaps no more than 40-50 pairs in any one year. There is evidence of a marked decline in population from many sites since 1980 (Jennings, 2010).

In the United Arab Emirates, Roseate Tern has remained exceptionally rare, despite a large upsurge in observer effort and expertise in the last two decades. Prior to September 2013, the UAE Bird Checklist (Pedersen & Aspinall, 2010) detailed only two records, dating from October 1986 and May 1989, and both from locations within the Arabian Gulf. However, the east coast of the UAE has a number of sites that periodically attract large numbers of gulls and terns, especially in the autumn and winter. With luck, or persistence, it is usually possible to find undisturbed resting flocks that can be viewed

at leisure. Fujairah Port Beach (WA27) is one such prolific site that, despite rampant development and regular disturbance from recreational activities, still attracts such flocks. It was here that MS located two adult Roseate Terns on 6 September 2013. These were followed by a different adult and accompanying juvenile one week later, and then a series of reports from the same area until 4 October. There was also one record from Khor Fakkan beach (WA27), 20 km to the north. A summary of all reports received is provided below; unless noted otherwise, all observations were made at Fujairah Port Beach.

| Date 2013 | Details |
|-----------|--|
| 6 Sept | Two adults in breeding plumage resting on the beach. One of the birds was observed performing subservient begging, possibly indicative that these may have been a pair. (Photo page 14). |
| 13 Sept | Adult with a begging juvenile; the latter was observed at close range for 45 mins resting on the beach with the adult returning from fishing several times to feed it. |
| 14 Sept | One heavily-worn breeding-plumaged adult resting on the beach. Analysis of plumage wear suggests that this was a different individual from those previously observed. |
| 19 Sept | One breeding-plumaged adult resting on beach until disturbed by feral dogs. |
| 20 Sept | Adult with a begging juvenile at Khor Fakkan beach. The adult was observed to aggressively attack adjacent Common Terns <i>S. hirundo</i> . |
| 28 Sept | One adult in non-breeding plumage resting on the beach. |
| 4 Oct | One adult in non-breeding plumage resting on the beach; seemingly a different individual from that on 28 September. |

It was possible to distinguish some individuals on plumage state and wear and an analysis of available images suggests that at least nine individuals (seven adults and two juveniles) were present. A selection of images obtained is available at http://www.smugmug.com/gallery/33654587_WCQCzm#i.

The field appearance of the Roseate Terns observed on the UAE East Coast in autumn 2013 was rather interesting and worthy of comment. The two records of an adult with a dependent juvenile, involving four individuals, based on analysis of plumage, both essentially showed birds indistinguishable from Roseate Terns breeding in the north-east Atlantic and hence familiar to and easily identifiable by observers from, for example, the UK. The adults were very pale with long, thin, virtually all-black bills whilst juveniles were even more characteristic. Although their black legs and heavily marked saddles more resembled juvenile White-cheeked Tern *S. repressa* than Common Terns, they were still easily distinguishable by wide white fringes to all primaries, very pale rumps and wing coverts and much heavier blackish scaling on

the scapulars, tertials and mantle feathers. Other adult birds showed a rather different appearance, however, with long, slender, bright orange bills with little or no black at the tip, somewhat recalling a small Lesser Crested Tern *S. bengalensis*. However, they also exhibited distinctively pale plumage (compared to adjacent Common Terns) and characteristic white fringes to the inner primary webs, appearing as a solid white line along the upper edge of the folded primaries at rest.

Traditionally, four or five subspecies of Roseate Tern have been recognised (Cramp & Perrins, 1977-1994, Olsen and Larsson, 1995). However, the taxonomy of this species is clearly in need of revision (HBW-Alive, 2013) and it has been suggested that subspecies from the Indo-Pacific region are particularly poorly differentiated. The subspecies breeding on Masirah island, Oman has been suggested as *S. d. arideensis* (Jennings, 2010) although Cramp & Perrins (1977-1994) and Olsen and Larsson (1995) state that *S. d. bangsii* occurs instead, although *bangsii* is regarded as synonymous with *arideensis* by some authors. The strikingly red-billed birds discussed above match the appearance of *S. d. arideensis* (Klaus Malling Olsen in litt); the black-billed adults, whilst rather different in appearance, are presumably also the same subspecies and merely reflect variation in timing of attainment of a blackish bill after the breeding season. In the north Atlantic, many birds acquire an all-black bill by July or August, with almost all having such a bill by the end of September (Olsen & Larsson, 1995), although Indian Ocean birds may not necessarily adhere closely to this.

One final issue worthy of comment is the presence of dependent juveniles in UAE waters in early autumn and their potential source. Juveniles are fed by adults for several weeks, and probably months; adults and attendant juveniles have been seen together in Ghana in October – November (Cramp & Perrins, 1977-1994) so such behaviour is not necessarily indicative of breeding nearby. The species appears to be declining sharply in Oman, with no breeding birds found in colonies on Masirah in 2013 (Jens Eriksen in litt). However, two pairs (one seen copulating) were observed on the southern tip of Masirah during the same visit and may still be breeding close by. Birds from Masirah would have to disperse approximately 900 km northwards to reach the UAE east coast, assuming they avoided flying over land. An alternative explanation may be the presence at very low densities, at least in 2013, of the species in some of the large, remote (and hence rarely visited) tern colonies in the Arabian Gulf and subsequent autumn dispersal into the Indian Ocean.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to all UAE observers who submitted records or joined us in the field whilst studying these birds. We offer particular thanks to Tommy Pedersen who, in his capacity as UAE Bird Recorder, provided details of sightings from the UAE Bird Database, to Klaus Malling Olsen for helpful comments on the identification and subspecific identity of the birds and to Jens Eriksen for information on the current status of the species in Oman.

References: ● Birdguides Ltd. 2008. *Birds of the Western Palearctic Interactive*, Vers 2.0.1. DVD-ROM. ● Lynx Edicions. 2013. *Handbook of the Birds of the World – Alive*. <http://www.hbw.com/>. Accessed 10 November 2013.

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Observations on Southern Red Bishops at two sites in the UAE

By Oscar Campbell, John Pereira and Ahmed al Ali

In recent decades, exotic birds have become an increasingly significant and obvious part of the Arabian avifauna. Jennings (2010) formally recognises 20 established exotic breeding species (i.e. those with self-sustaining populations), representing some 9% of the all breeding species in the region (and an increase from 5% in 1995). Many of these species are concentrated in urban areas of the Arabian Gulf region, where some are amongst the most conspicuous members of the local avifauna. Others, however, are much less obvious and, further, are often ignored by observers, thereby leading to significant under-recording.

The Southern Red Bishop, *Euplectes orix*, has been recorded regularly (if sparsely) in the UAE since 1988, when the first individual was noted in Dubai (VA27). By 1997 the species was apparently established in the Dubai – Sharjah area (Jennings, 2010), although the first record in the UAE Bird Database is from February 1998, when one was recorded in Safa Park, Dubai (T. Pedersen in litt.). The same site held ten birds in October 2000. Since then the species has been recorded from at least nine sites in the UAE although several of these on Abu Dhabi Island, are in close proximity of each other and so probably involve a single population. Virtually all records have come from sites close to the Arabian Gulf; the only exception being a single bird reported from another urban location, Wadi Al Ain (VB25), approximately 160 km inland, in November 2009. In all, the UAE Bird Database contains a total of 44 records for the species from 1998 until April 2013.

In recent years, the two most regular sites from which Southern Red Bishops have been reported are Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club (UA25), Abu Dhabi Island and Wasit Protected Area, Sharjah. At both sites, birds have been recorded in virtually every year since 2006. The purpose of the current short note is to summarise observations, made by the authors, at each of these sites, mainly during regular visits throughout much of 2013. Although breeding was not formally confirmed at either site (indeed, it has never been confirmed in the UAE), strong circumstantial evidence of breeding was obtained, and this is detailed below.

Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club, a small (approximately 0.4 km²) and wholly manmade site, is surrounded by suburbia in the middle of Abu Dhabi Island. It comprises a city golf

course, surrounded by sand and grass horse-racing tracks. Two small ornamental lakes are partially fringed by small areas of emergent *Phragmites australis* comprising the only native vegetation, although various exotic trees and shrubs have been widely planted. In 2013, birdwatching visits to this site by OC were frequent; averaging several per week for much of the year, although no visits were made in July and August due to observer absence. Southern Red Bishops were recorded regularly at this site from 11 March onwards; visits during January and February failed to locate any. However, this may reflect the rather retiring nature of the species outside the presumed breeding season, rather than any movement away from the site. From 11 March, the species was recorded quite regularly until 13 November, although numbers were generally small (mean count 2.5, from 20 dates on which the species was recorded; range one to six individuals). The species was not recorded after 13 November, although frequency of visits was less in late autumn and winter. The first male in partial breeding plumage was recorded on 17 April and from 26 May, males in full breeding plumage were regularly noted; the last record (13 November) also involved a singing male. Males were frequently seen in display, giving a distinctive, buzzy song, typical of the *Euplectes* genus, from a prominent perch. Favoured song sites comprised a line of low, exotic shrubs, from which birds sang from exposed perches at an elevation of approximately 3-4 m. (10-12 feet), or from the reed-bed fringing the small ornamental lakes, where again singing birds perched prominently. Display postures, with the male fluffing out his conspicuous, bright rump and back feathers were also noted, sometimes accompanied by short 'bumble' flights where the male appeared to pursue, for short distances, a much drabber female. Such display postures were generally given from a perch but sometimes from the ground. As a routine part of site management, a favoured reed-bed was completely cleared out in September, but birds appeared not to be deterred; they continued to be seen singing nearby, even whilst work was in progress. The behaviour recorded and described above accords well with that described in HBW-Alive (2013) and by Aspinall (2010) for the small population at Safa Park, which were (believed to be) breeding in a very similar microhabitat. Males are polygynous and breeding success is believed to be linked to the number of nests that they can construct (HBW-Alive, 2013). Although circumstantial evidence for breeding was strong at Abu Dhabi Golf and Equestrian Club in 2013, confirmation of it was not obtained. Being effectively part of a busy golf course, there is very limited access to the actual reed-bed, the most likely nesting site. Further, the fact that fledged juveniles are effectively identical to adult females makes their recognition well-nigh impossible. Away from song-sites, female birds (and sometimes males) were observed foraging unobtrusively on maintained lawns and by ornamental seeding grasses, sometimes amongst large flocks of House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*. In 2013 Indian Silverbills *Lonchura malabarica* were also rarely seen in loose association. In former years Streaked Weaver *Ploceus manyar* has also been erratically recorded at the same site in summer, but not since 2009. Although Southern Red Bishop was recorded at several nearby sites on Abu Dhabi Island in 2006, none were recorded away from the present site in 2013.

Wasit Protected Area is a wetland site under the control and management of the Environment and Protected Areas Authority of Sharjah. It is situated 3 km west of Sharjah International airport; it is completely surrounded by urban development, but is currently fenced off from the public, and has seen extensive rehabilitation from its previously heavily disturbed state. The area is dominated by a large body of brackish water fed from an underwater spring source; vegetation consists of a large variety of indigenous and non-indigenous species. The protected area has a surface area of approximately 87.5 hectares with a 5.41 km perimeter. Weekly bird surveys were completed here during the course of 2013 by JP, Ester Buzas and Liselore Verceampst. As at the Abu Dhabi site, breeding plumaged males were recorded from May to November and up to five were recorded displaying on a single visit, although normally two or three were noted. The more secretive females were recorded less frequently, with a maximum of three on one visit. Overall numbers appear to have changed little since 2006. Obvious territorial behaviour, as described above from Abu Dhabi (and, in addition, including aggressive behaviour towards other males) was noted mainly from June to August, and, although breeding was not confirmed, is considered very likely – the nature of the dense beds of *P. australis* at this site, frequented by displaying (and presumably nesting) birds makes finding nests very difficult. Southern Red Bishops at Wasit Protected Area have been observed feeding on seeding ornamental grasses in the company of Indian Silverbill and Scaly-breasted Munia *L. punctulata*.

The general appearance of the male Southern Red Bishops occurring in Abu Dhabi is shown in the photo at page 14. There are four other species of very similar *Euplectes* bishops occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, in which the males differ mainly in the precise pattern of red and black on the head and neck, whilst all females and immatures are extremely similar (Sinclair & Ryan, 2003). The combination of red on the neck not reaching the bill and red on the crown extending forward only to the level of the eye indicates *E. orix* and excludes all similar species. However, males in the UAE consistently show rather pale, orange red colours to the neck, nape, crown, mantle and undertail; a tone somewhat different to the deep, deep fiery-crimson that the species is often depicted as exhibiting in its native range (see, for example, Sinclair & Ryan 2003; also see http://www.smugmug.com/gallery/7960978_dhffy for a small selection of images of the species from locations in the UAE). However, a perusal of images available on the World Wide Web indicates that this colour tone is exhibited by at least some birds in Africa.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks, as ever, to Tommy Pedersen for compiling and providing records from the UAE Bird Database.

References: ● Aspinall, S.J. 2010. *Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates*. Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi. ● Lynx Edicions. 2013. *Handbook of the Birds of the World – Alive*. <http://www.hbw.com/>. Accessed 27 October 2013. ● Jennings, M.C. 2010. Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia. *Fauna of Arabia* 25. ● Sinclair, I. & P. Ryan. 2003. *Birds of Africa South of the Sahara*. Struik, Capetown.

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Socotra in August - ABBA Survey 48

Of the more than 1900 records on the ABBA database from Socotra Island, Yemen, more than 95% relate to the months October to April and only nine records of the total refer to the month of August. Because of this gap it has been a long term desire of mine to go to the island during August to see at first hand what is around and if anything is breeding. We already know that Persian Shearwater *Puffinus (lherminieri) persicus* and Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax* are breeding in this month, as that is what most August records relate to, but what else?

I visited during August 2013 and with hindsight I can say that I need not have bothered, the weather and conditions were dire and it was often difficult find and to see birds! Altogether I had planned 18 days on the island from 14 August, but my original return flight was cancelled and I needed to leave three days early. I camped five nights at 1000 m in the mountains at Adhu Dimellus (UA02) and then had other trips out and camps from Hadibu (UA02) to Momi UA01), Nowged (TB01 and UA01), Shoab and Galancia (both TA02).

During August I found Socotra hot on the north coast, windy almost everywhere much of the time and in the mountains there was more or less permanent low cloud at about 1000 m., not generally preferred conditions for bird-watching. There was a little song but otherwise no evidence of land-birds breeding or showing signs of breeding in the near future. On my previous visit to Socotra in December 2000 I had seen all the endemics within a couple of days of arriving but on this occasion I struggled to see many and some, and other usually common birds, were missed altogether. For example Socotra Scops Owls *Otus socotranus* were not heard, and no Socotra Cisticola *Cisticola haesitatus*, Socotra Bunting *Emberiza socotrana* or Cinnamon Breasted Bunting *E. tahapisi* were seen.

In the highlands at Adhu Dimellus conditions were depressing, I was there for five nights camping, although there was only proper rain on two days there was low wet cloud for most of the rest of the time. I only saw the sun for a few minutes on one day when a gap in the clouds passed over but I never saw the mountain tops and it was really only possible to get out and bird for 2-3 hours a day at the most, although I could find better conditions if I walked down from the plateau by only 200 m or so. I saw a few Golden-winged Grosbeaks *Rhynchostruthus socotranus*, Abyssinian White-eye *Zosterops abyssinicus*, and Socotra Warbler *Incana incana* on the top. Bruce's Green Pigeon *Treron waalia* was the commonest bird up there and Brown-necked Ravens *Corvus ruficollis* were outside my tent every day. Socotra Sunbirds *Chalcomitra balfouri* were only seen on the escarpment leading up to Adhu, never at 1000 m or above or on the coastal plain. One mixed group of foraging

Socotra Starlings *Onychognathus frater* and Somali Starlings *O. blythi* on close grazed grass was observed. What was interesting was that whilst the Somali Starlings habitually dig with their bills I never saw the Socotra's doing this but was surprised to see them turning over loose cow pats in the manner of Turnstone *Arenaria interpres* or Temminck's Lark *Eremophila bilopha*. This behaviour appears not to have been recorded before. The Somalis did not do this. I also noticed that there was quite a bit of dominance behaviour exhibited by the more numerous and agile Somali Starlings towards the other starling, which was often displaced and chased off by the Somali Starlings. I had not heard of such interactions before and it maybe that food is in short supply during August and therefore more competition at prime foraging sites. I also briefly visited the highlands up to 1000 m at Dixem (TB02) on the road to and from the southern Nowged plain. Dixem was also in fog but I did see one of the fine local Peregrines *Falco peregrinus* eating a recently caught Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis* in a tree by the road. Socotra Peregrines are small with a spotted white breast and probably the African race *minor*.

The sea was always rough and offshore there were generally good numbers of Persian Shearwaters to be seen. Near Kurria (UA02) there were probably more than a thousand clustered over one spot feeding or sitting in rafts on the sea. Jouanin's Petrel was also associated with these flocks at Kurria and Shoab but generally in small numbers. Up to 50 Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* were also over the sea at Kurria, along with a few Swift Tern *Sterna bergii* and Brown Noddys *Anous stolidus*. Other seabirds were rather scarce, only a few Sooty Gulls *Larus hemprichii* were to be seen and these were mostly in sheltered positions like the Hadibu khor and creek whilst a sandbar near Galancia held a few Sandwich *S. sandvicensis* and White-cheeked Terns *S. repressa*, the latter with some dependent juveniles. Socotra Cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis* were seen only once, about 1000 had a daytime roost in the bay north of Galancia.

The small creek near Hadibu had a Great White Egret *Ardea alba* and a Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis* on 15 August and had most of the 16 wader species noted, including the locally scarce Marsh Sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*, Lesser Sand Plover *Charadrius mongolus*, and Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*, among others. There were two Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* at Kurria Khor on 23 August. On Nowged I had one pair of Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor* and three Socotra Buzzards *Buteo socotraensis*.

Migrant passerines were absent in the first two weeks, from 25 August I had a total of one Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*, 19 Barn Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and four Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava*.

On 25 August there were two Pied Crows *Corvus albus* at Diham (TB02). One or two have been seen on the island for a few years now; is this the next Arabian breeding bird?

Mike Jennings

As announced elsewhere in this issue *the Phoenix* is to close as a newsletter. However the ABBA project will continue to collect data on the range, population, movement, ecology and other aspects of resident and visiting breeding bird species in the Arabian Peninsula. If you would like to submit records to the ABBA project a set of formats and instructions (digital or hard copies) can be obtained by contacting the Coordinator Mike Jennings at Arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com or Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, UK, PE28 3WD. (See also page 15)

New Books

Phoenix aims to provide details of all new publications which are relevant to birds and wildlife in Arabia or generally to the Arabian/Middle East environment. Titles mentioned are usually available in good book shops in Arabia, Europe and North America. Others are on restricted distribution or privately published and readers wishing to obtain copies should contact the author, publisher or distributor mentioned. When ordering through a library or agent quote the ISBN or ISSN number if given. The prices shown against titles are published prices but may not include post and packaging. Recommendations made about books are based on the standard of treatment of the subject, format and quality of contents. A recommendation does not necessarily mean good value for money.

Oman Bird List Edition 7 - The official list of the birds of the Sultanate of Oman by Jens Eriksen and Reginald Victor (2013)

It has been ten years since the appearance of Version 6 of the best and most regularly updated national bird list in Arabia. The last edition covered 482 species and ran to 174 pages and this one covers over 540 species runs to 288 pages. The format of the new edition is more or less the same as previously, distribution maps in atlas style for each breeding bird, histograms for monthly occurrence of migrants, species status and occurrence text, but this edition has lots more and bigger photographs (there are 500). The species accounts provide all the data you need to understand the status and occurrence of each species in each month. Often there are notes on habitat and individual sites of occurrence for species. The atlas style maps show confirmed, probable and possible breeding. For visiting species the occurrence histograms show the total number of records on the Oman Bird Records Committee database to date and those records split into three part months, i.e. early, mid and late periods, over the whole database period. The result gives a quick visual assessment as whether you are likely to see the bird at a given time. For vagrants (nine or less records), of which there are 139 listed, each record is given (date, place quantity etc) without a histogram. A few species get a map and a histogram. For all species the likely subspecies

occurring are usually provided, there is a IUCN/Birdlife conservation status symbol (the Oman list includes one Extinct, two Critically Endangered and two Endangered species, there are a further 15 Vulnerable and 19 Near Threatened) and a symbol indicating whether the species is increasing, decreasing or more or less the same number (more are increasing than decreasing) plus the regions where it occurs in Oman (five regions are defined). At the end there is a gazetteer of bird sites in Oman, acknowledgements, a selected bibliography and an index of bird names. Recommended and essential for anyone birding in Oman.

Card covers, 288 pages (240 mm x 170 mm. Published by the Centre for Environmental Studies and Research, Sultan Qaboos University. Available from Jens Eriksen (www.birdsoman.com/) cost RO10 (postfree), also from NHBS and Amazon (price unknown). ISBN 978-99969-0-218-5.

Birds of Central Asia by Raffael Ayé, Manuel Schweizer and Robias Roth (2012)

The sub-title of this field guide is 'Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan'. It is the first field guide to the region, 'Central Asia' has a variable definition but now, in the English speaking world means generally the southern Muslim republics of the old USSR, Afghanistan is a pragmatic addition. The arid treeless steppes which cover a great part of the region have many similarities with the Arabian desert and share many breeding species, like Asian Houbara, Cream-coloured Courser, three species of sandgrouse and Isabelline and Desert Wheatears to name a few. In addition many winter visitors to Arabia, especially large raptors and waders, originate from this region and it is home to many species which pass through Arabia on migration. Unlike most field guides, which tend to jump straight into species accounts without much introduction, this one has 34 pages of valuable background and introductory stuff, including a nice clear political map for this region of convoluted borders; there are geographical and biogeographical notes, more maps of topography and climate, and biomes. Eighteen photos illustrate a huge range of habitats from deciduous and evergreen forest to deserts and mountain tops up to 7500 m. A huge range of habitats means of course a huge diversity of birds which include elements of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas. Zoogeographically the region is predominantly palearctic with a weighting to the Eastern Palearctic, especially within the passerines. Like Arabia there is a strong flavour of oriental species creeping into the eastern parts, notably in Afghanistan. Taxonomy follows Dickinson generally with a large number of deviations reflecting the more important recent DNA work. The 618 species covered, include all residents (there are three regional endemics), migrants and vagrants. The species notes focus on identification including races, voice, habitat and maps for all but vagrants. Important identification points are in bold. Text, maps and illustrations are all on a single opening. The colour maps are coded for resident, breeding summer visitor,

winter and migration and non-breeding summer range, with supplementary '?'s for uncertain occurrences and arrows for flyways etc. The authors cram a lot of detail in to the 28 mm X 18 mm maps but the results are surprisingly clear. The 143 plates cover every species including distinctive races and are to a high standard, prepared by 14 artists but most are by Dave Nurney. Three appendices cover old vagrants (pre 1950) which are not illustrated, moult and ageing of large raptors (useful stuff), identifying gulls by age related plumage characters and there is an adequate reference list and index. There is also a list of organisations and websites and resources to help those research the birds of the area. This land, with upwards of 5 million km², was *terra incognita* for western birders a couple of decades ago but now many go there and this field guide will be need to be in everyone's pocket on future trips. Recommended.

Card Cover (although described as hardback), 336 pages, £35. The Helm Field Guides, London an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing (www.bloomsbury.com). ISBN 978-0-7136-7078-7. Also available as an epub and pdf.

Phenology of Pallid Scops Owl vocalisations in Oman

By Magnus Robb and Arnoud B. van den Berg

From March to July 2013, we spent five periods 19-27 March, 23-30 April, 18-31 May, 11-12 July and 22-24 July recording owl sounds, including those of Pallid Scops Owl *Otus brucei* in the northern foothills of the Al Hajar mountains (XB23), northern Oman

The habitat where we made our recordings consists of deep wadis surrounded by steep rocky slopes, rising from 500 m to a maximum of c 1750 m. Vegetation is very sparse, although there is a scattering of mature Elb trees *Ziziphus spina-cristi* in the wadi beds. The owls perched mainly in these and in *Acacia tortilis* of various sizes some of which grow on the more gradual slopes. Species such as Laughing Dove *Streptopelia senegalensis*, Desert Lark *Ammomanes deserti*, Hume's Wheatear *Oenanthe alboniger* and Yellow-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthopygos* dominate the habitat by day. At night the Oman Owl *Strix omanensis* and Lilith Owl *Athene glaux* are present in the same habitat, on the slopes rather than the wadi floor (NB We recognise the former subspecies *A. noctua glaux* as a species, which also includes *A. n. lilith*)

We listened both with and without the aid of sound recording equipment, using playback and torches only rarely. Despite following up our nocturnal listening with daytime searches, we did not discover any confirmed nests. Our primary purpose was not to measure activity levels or territory spacing but to record and understand the vocal repertoire of Pallid Scops Owl (Robb & The Sound Approach, in prep).

On calm nights in March, we heard Pallid Scops Owls frequently, often from two territories at once. We heard very few vocalisations on nights when the wind was strong enough to rustle the leaves of the trees, at which time the owls were also more difficult to detect. Pukinskiy et al (1991) likewise noted a lack of calling on windy nights. Individual males could be recognised by their territorial hooting: the number of hoots per minute varied widely between individuals but remained extremely consistent for each one, as noted also by Pukinskiy et al (1991). This enabled us to estimate that in a stretch of fairly narrow wadi just 1.5 km long, there were at least five territorial males. In March we often heard females vocalising together with their mates. Pairs would move around their territories, calling from a number of different trees during the night, not following any regular route, and making it difficult for us to know where to position microphones. The females did not usually hoot like the males but gave wèh calls, which are variable and slightly higher-pitched than male hooting. The timbre of these calls becomes harsher with increasing pitch, and they were given in an irregular rhythm; once every few seconds when relaxed up to about two per second when the female was excited. The male's hooting and the female's wèh calls were often given simultaneously but not as a coordinated duet.

In April, calling activity was at a similar or slightly lower level. It was noticeable that in some territories where we heard females in March these were now silent, suggesting that they were incubating. Members of other pairs still called together while moving round their territory. We recorded two copulations of these more active pairs, betrayed by the very high-pitched copulation calls of the male. This was something we had not heard in March.

In May, we were surprised to find that calling activity had increased. Pallid Scops Owls from one territory or another could be heard almost continuously. There had been heavy rains in late April, which presumably boosted insect life over the subsequent weeks, and may have lead to higher than usual activity levels in May. One pair that we followed returned frequently to the same tree. However, we were unable to confirm that it contained a nest. When AB climbed about 100 m on the steep slopes of the wadi, he was surprised to find Pallid Scops Owls calling higher than we had previously detected them. We recorded five copulations in May. Contrary to expectations, we did not record any sounds attributable to owlets, either nestlings or fledglings.

In July, we did not hear any Pallid Scops Owls at all during either visit, despite listening carefully for begging calls of juveniles. We assume that the juveniles had already become independent. At dawn on 12 July, AB found a Pallid Scops perched on a tree but it flew off before he could photograph it.

With incubation and fledging periods both lasting a month or slightly less (Cramp, 1985), and Eurasian Scops Owl *O. scops* taking up to ten more days to become independent, egg-laying must have taken place no later than the first week of May. In



From top:

More Greater Flamingos *Phoenicopterus roseus* bred at Wathba reserve (UB25), Abu Dhabi, UAE, in 2013 than ever before and for the third year running. Here a creche of mostly large unfledged young and some small chicks stand in water in front of adults still incubating. See page 23. (Photo Shakeel Ahmed).

An adult and four small chicks of Common Coot *Fulica atra* were observed at Jahra Pool Reserve (NB35), Kuwait on 9 May 2013. This is the first recorded breeding of the species in Kuwait for 16 years (Photo: Khaled al Ghanem).



On 8 May 2012 Monif al Rashidi and Mohanad Abdelgadir Ali found the nest of a Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta* in the Elgaid region, Hail Province (HB32), north central Saudi Arabia. It was concealed in a citrus tree about 1.5m above ground level, with two eggs. The nest was a neat cup and thickly lined with wool, cotton string and tissue paper. The nest was re-visited later and the nestlings were ringed and photographed after morphometric measurements and blood samples were taken. (Photo by Monif al Rashidi; m.alrashidi@uoh.edu.sa).



most owls, incubation is a quiet period and there is a resurgence of adult calls after the eggs have hatched (M. Robb, pers obs). If eggs had indeed recently hatched in late May when we noted a peak in adult vocal activity, the calls of the nestlings must have been too weak to hear from beneath the trees in which nests were situated. The higher prevalence of copulation in late May was unexpected.

In our study site, traffic often made the owls more difficult to hear during the first half of the night. From midnight to dawn, however, we noticed two clear peaks in activity. Although they could start calling at any time from midnight till about half an hour before sunrise, the owls were most active from 02:00-03:00 and during the predawn twilight. By contrast, Pukinskiy et al (1991) only reported a short predawn peak.

To summarize, calling activity of Pallid Scops Owls was high in late March and April, noticeably higher in May and zero in July. This disagrees with Sargeant et al 2008, who state that "there is a limited calling period from January to April." It is possible that weather conditions in 2013 influenced this pattern.

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This is intended to be the last issue of *Phoenix* (see page 2). Is it planned that there will be some availability of hard copies of back issues for a few months only and whole sets will be discontinued during the next year or so. Details of how to obtain back issues of *Phoenix* are at page 6.

Greater Flamingo breed for third consecutive year in Al Wathba, UAE

In 2013 Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopteru s roseus* bred in Al Wathba Wetland Reserve (UB25) for the third year running, and more chicks were raised than ever before.

Another 'first' was that there were two successful breeding attempts. Firstly, by mid-February, 41 chicks had successfully hatched. The second attempt commenced in April when birds started to congregate near the breeding island and made mounds. They also used mounds still intact from the previous

breeding. By the first week of May, more than 100 mounds were made and the first egg was recorded on 6 May. Nearly 320 mounds were completed by the end of that month with an equal number of birds sitting on them. The first chick was seen on 1 June and by the end of the month, 168 chicks were recorded. The number of chicks reached 201 by the end of July. Interestingly, the breeding period was extended this year as new mounds were also being made in the first week of July. Since Greater Flamingo started breeding at Al Wathba, 201 chicks has been the highest number fledged at one time and added to the first successful breeding, the grand total for 2013 was 242 chicks fledged. There was no abrupt abandonment of the colony in 2013 as had occurred in the past and birds were at the colony until mid-August when the chicks started to move away from the island to other parts of the reserve. Active trapping efforts to catch foxes and dogs assured minimum disturbance to breeding birds and this no doubt contributed to the overall success. Optimum water levels and temperature were also helpful in addition to the use of the man-made island.

Prior to 2013 flamingos bred in Al Wathba during summer 2011, when 18 chicks fledged and in summer 2012, when 17 chicks fledged. Both these breeding attempts occurred during the hot summer months by over wintering birds. Winters witness a higher number of birds in the reserve as numbers are augmented by migrants from north. During the earlier breeding occurrences nests were built on the small man-made island in one of the larger water bodies that was constructed in 2004. Previously to those years successful breeding was recorded during winter 1998-99 (six chicks). This was the first time that the species had bred in the Arabian Peninsula since 1922.

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First breeding in Arabia of the Greater Painted Snipe

By Rob Tovey

On 16 May 2013, Lou Regenmorter, Mansur Al Fahad and I visited the Sabya waste water lakes (IB11), north of Jizan, south west Saudi Arabia. These lakes lie within earthworks and are surrounded by low vegetation and some acacia. The water is supplied by bowzers from the nearby towns. Although the site is well known for a variety of water birds, including breeding Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* (see *Phoenix* 27:1) the main aim for us was to see Greater Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* which had been reported from the site since 2010 and had been seen more recently by Brian James and Lou in March.

On reaching the first and dirtiest lake, two separate Painted Snipe flew over the water in different directions. Moments



Greater Painted Snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* bred for the first time in Arabia near Sabya (IB11) in summer 2013 (see page 23). The female of this species is often polyandrous, i.e. having several male partners, and is more boldly marked than the male, which are often left incubating as the female moves on to another clutch with another male. The nest is not recorded yet in Arabia but elsewhere it is placed on the ground, usually in thick marshy vegetation, four eggs is the usual clutch. Artwork by Jan Wilczur.

later our attention was drawn to two more adults walking at the edge of the lake next to some grass about 35 cm tall. After a couple of minutes or so they slowly walked into the grass to take cover. Half an hour later we revisited the area and they had returned to the open. We tracked them as they walked round the clump of grass (viewing from the far side of the lake) when we noticed there was actually a family of two adults and two chicks. Photographs were taken by Mansur Al Fahad and one of these was the basis for the adjacent drawing.

We did not see any Painted Snipes in the other cleaner lakes further from the water disposal point. We can only surmise they were breeding near the first lake because the cover next to the water's edge is better there than at the other lakes, although we cannot rule out breeding in other parts of the site as well.

The next morning, 30 km away at Lake Malaki (IB11), I flushed another Painted Snipe which flew low and far to cover. This sighting supports Brian James's observation of them there two months earlier.

The Greater Painted Snipe remains a very rare bird in Arabia, it is classed as a vagrant in the UAE, Oman and Yemen, is unknown

in Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait and has only been recorded in Saudi Arabia since 2010 at the two sites mentioned. It has an Old World range that includes western and southern Africa and much of south and south west Asia to Australia. Its nearest breeding localities to south west Arabia are Pakistan, Suez and Ethiopia. Presumably the breeding birds of south west Saudi Arabia originate from the latter locality.

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Credits: Photos are credited on the page they appear. Many thanks to all the photographers shown for allowing their work to be reproduced in *Phoenix* without charge. In each case the photographer retains the copyright to their work and these pictures may not be reproduced elsewhere without their permission. I am most grateful to Jan Wilczur for the artwork on page 24. Carol Qirreh provided indispensable help at all stages in the preparation of this issue. Printed by Impressions, 93 High Street, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3EE, UK.

Address: Reports of breeding birds in Arabia and all correspondence concerning the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia and *The Phoenix*, should be sent to: Michael Jennings, ABBA Coordinator, Warners Farm House, Warners Drove, Somersham, Cambridgeshire, PE28 3WD, UK. Telephone, 01487 841733 / International 00 44 1487 841733 (Arabianbirds@dsl.pipex.com).